

Joel Graham Brinkley '75

Can we even imagine what the feelings must have been?

Joel Brinkley lay bedridden with typhoid. Only a week before he had been in Thailand reporting for his paper, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, on the human side of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. "I had expected it to be overwhelming and depressing, but it was so much more overwhelming and depressing than I had ever imagined," he recalled.

Getting the paper to foot the bill for the assignment had been the first challenge. A fine newspaper with a strong journalistic tradition, the *Courier-Journal* is nonetheless a regional paper in the middle of the continent not known for its international coverage. Nonetheless, Joel prevailed, in part on the strength of a local angle: the work of a Louisville physician and his wife in Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand.

But once the newspaper got over the \$18,000 bill for the trip to Thailand for Joel and a photographer, and once Joel got over the typhoid, there was one more chapter to the story. Competing against Peter Arnett of the Associated Press (for his stories on the world's homeless), Fox Butterfield of *The New York Times* (for his dispatches from China), and the staff of *The Los Angeles Times* (for its coverage of Iran), Joel and his photographer won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting. The newspaper, needless to say, was pleased. "I am overjoyed," said its publisher. "In our long history we have never won a Pulitzer for international reporting. It took innovative and excellent writing and photography."

The road to the Pulitzer had begun only nine years earlier when Joel enrolled at UNC and began the course study leading to his degree in journalism. Along the way he was news editor and managing editor of *The Daily Tar Heel* and recipient of several student journalism awards.

Then it was off to Charlotte for a stint with the Associated Press, followed by three years reporting for the *Richmond News-Leader* before going to Louisville. From the Pulitzer for international reporting, Joel moved to other arenas and other awards. For example, in 1981 he was named National Citizen of the Year by the National Association of Social Workers, and in 1983 he won a national award for his four-part series: "Nobody's Watching: Why Kentucky doesn't protect us from dangerous doctors," about the ineffectiveness of the state's medical licensure board.

In 1983 Joel became a correspondent in *The New York Times* Washington bureau and soon began covering Nicaragua and the contras. His extensive travels in that troubled region were the source for both a lauded series of stories on American military preparation for possible invasion of Nicaragua and his 1988 novel *The Circus Master's Mission*, published by Random House.

Circus Master is a political thriller about the first term of a new American president, the contras who want more military aid, and Washington politicians who want to maintain the status quo—to keep themselves out of the situation lest it damage their careers. The intrigue centers around a young, ambitious, and naive State Department officer lured into a scheme to invade Nicaragua.

Publishers Weekly said: "What gives [Brinkley's] story its edge is insight into the workings of government—the squabbles, the denials, the carefully planned leaks—that can't be faked."

From Nicaragua, Joel has trained that insight on other governments in other

parts of the world. He has, for instance, been *The New York Times* bureau chief in Jerusalem.

Whether it is the fictional world of a military invasion in Central America, the real world of war refugees in southeast Asia, or the close-to-home world of dangerous doctors, Joel Brinkley tells us the story in clear and human terms. Through his open eyes, we see clearly. Through his words we feel deeply.

We, citizens of the world and friends of this University, are grateful.